

USDA nukes plan to close FSA offices; Congressional delegation lauds decision

By TOM SCHULTES

It appears efforts to thwart the closure of several Farm Service Agency offices, including the one in Las Animas, have been successful, at least for a while.

Recently, members of the Colorado congressional delegation have released announcements regarding the change in strategy.

In a press release, U.S. Senator Ken Salazar (D-Colo.) applauded the USDA's recent abandonment of the proposed Farm Service Agency (FSA) office closings. Recognizing the Congressional opposition that has developed, USDA has decided to 'set aside' their 'FSA Tomorrow' approach.

FSA encompasses the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service, Federal Crop Insurance Corporation (now known as Risk Management Agency) and the farm credit portion of the Farmers Home Administration. The Farm Service Agency administers farm commodity and conservation programs and makes and guarantees farm emergency, ownership, and operating loans.

Salazar, who sits on the Senate Agriculture Committee, had already raised serious concerns over the proposed closures and was prepared to send a letter to USDA expressing his disapproval of the proposed closures. Salazar also planned to question the USDA's reasoning for closing

FSA offices in some of Colorado's poorest counties during a hearing on this issue that had been scheduled for Thursday, Oct. 20. Twelve Colorado counties including Bent, Fremont, Saguache, Rio Grande, Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Delta, Montrose, Dolores, Larimer and Boulder would have faced FSA office closings under USDA's proposal.

"These proposed FSA closures would have negatively impacted farmers and ranchers in Colorado and highlighted another example of the neglect that this Administration has shown for rural America," Salazar said. "As a result, I am pleased that they have reversed their direction and I look forward to working with the FSA to

further review the agency and improve their outreach and assistance for farmers and ranchers."

U.S. Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-Colo.) has also praised the Farm Service Administration's (FSA) decision to delay interruptions of service in rural communities and set aside proposed office closures throughout Colorado as part of their "FSA Tomorrow" plan.

Musgrave expressed her support for the decision in a press release from her Washington office.

"While I'm encouraged by the ultimate goal of FSA to modernize their service and utilize emerging technologies, I have

See FSA, page 9

FSA

from page 1

been working to ensure farmers and ranchers are being adequately served," Musgrave said. "Serving on the Agriculture Committee, I have been pushing for a thoughtful plan and I am pleased FSA is stepping back to re-evaluate. These offices are a key link to the department and frequently utilized by the agriculture industries in Bent, Larimer, and Boulder Counties."

In addition, Congresswoman Musgrave co-sponsored legislation to prohibit any local or county FSA office closing until 2007, when the next Farm Bill goes into effect. The bill, H.R. 3974, was introduced by Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Okla.).

Lewis Frank, state FSA executive director, is on vacation and was not available for comment. Local office personnel are being instructed to not comment on the decision, and refer inquiries to Frank.